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WEEKLY COLUMN

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Notes from the Georgia State Senate

Update on PeachCare, transportation, economic development

By State Sen. Bill Heath



The big news coming out of Atlanta this week was that Gov. Sonny Perdue and Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle have found a temporary solution to the PeachCare funding crisis until Congress approves funding for the program. As I've mentioned in some of my previous columns, PeachCare for Kids is a partnership between the state and federal governments and part of a program known as S-CHIP (State Child Health Insurance Program). The program has been insuring Georgia's working-class to middle-class children since 1999. Georgia's program covers children in families with incomes too high to qualify for Medicaid, but too low to afford health insurance.

State leaders have been dealing with a shortfall in federal funds for Fiscal Years 2007-08 for the vital program. This week, Gov. Perdue and Lt. Gov. Cagle announced that the state would change the law to allow Georgia to borrow state funds already slated to be used to pay for Medicaid to cover PeachCare costs. However, this would not move children into the Medicaid program, and any Medicaid funds expended would then be repaid using Congressional shortfall funds when they are approved. Gov. Perdue and Lt. Gov. Cagle have proven their commitment to Georgia's children and working families through this difficult situation, and I am confident that we will see this issue resolved in the upcoming weeks.

Economic Development news

Last week, Gov. Perdue also announced the launch of the Communities of Opportunity (Co-Op) Initiative. The initiative will allow local communities to engage in a comprehensive and collaborative approach to community development. Once launched, the Co-Op process will involve meeting with local stakeholders to determine their interest in participating. A community that decides to participate will receive an assessment and local, follow-up discussions will take place to determine focus areas. The purpose of this initiative is to offer a blueprint for creating the types of growing communities where Georgians want to live, work, raise families and operate their businesses. It is my hope that citizens will see this as an opportunity for local improvement and not a threat to their normal way of life, because the implementation of the initiative in a particular area is dependent upon local interest.

Transportation issues

The State Department of Transportation Board recently unveiled the Bold Initiative for Georgia Idea, or the “BIG Idea.” The proposal will invest more than \$22 billion over the next ten years using a statewide one cent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) that must be approved by the people of Georgia in a 2008 referendum vote. This effort is just one of the many ideas coming forward, as we look at ways to tackle our transportation needs in this state. The plan includes several specific transportation projects, including truck-only lanes, various mass transit projects, an east-west connector of I-75 and I-85 in north Georgia, the repair of old bridges, street and road work, paving many roads in Georgia and funding for Georgia’s ports and local airports. The proposal will originate as legislation in the House of Representatives (all state revenue bills must originate in the House), and includes an “iron-clad promise” to have all projects either under construction or completed within ten years. With the current issues of traffic congestion and gridlock across our state, we must consider ideas such as this to improve our infrastructure. I am pleased that Georgia’s citizens will ultimately decide on any issue of this magnitude, because it is important for voters to have the final word.

Remember to contact me in my office on the issues that are affecting you and your area.

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Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31st Senate District, which includes all of Haralson and Polk Counties and parts of Bartow and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.651.7738, or by email at billheath@billheath.net.